

**RELIGION AND ETHNO-POLITICAL CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: A SOCIO-POLITICAL ASSESSMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, represents a complex mosaic of religious and ethnic pluralism that has both enriched and destabilised its socio-political landscape. With a population almost evenly divided between Christianity and Islam and over 250 ethnic nationalities, the country has experienced recurrent ethno-political and religious conflicts that challenge national cohesion, democratic consolidation, and sustainable development. The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a socio-political analytical framework. It draws on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, conflict databases, policy documents, and reports from civil society and international organisations published up to 2025. The research employs thematic and content analysis to examine patterns of ethno-religious conflict, elite political behaviour, governance structures, and institutional responses. The findings reveal that while religion and ethnicity serve as visible markers of division, they often function as proximate triggers rather than fundamental causes of conflict. The deeper structural drivers include governance failures, weak state institutions, corruption, economic marginalisation, youth unemployment, competition over land and resources, the indigene-settler dichotomy, and the strategic manipulation of identity by political elites. The study recommends comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at strengthening democratic accountability, rule of law, and equitable resource distribution. It calls for inclusive governance structures that ensure fair political representation across religious and ethnic divides. Economic empowerment initiatives targeting youth unemployment and regional inequalities are essential to reducing vulnerability to mobilisation along identity lines. The study concludes that religion in Nigeria is not inherently conflictual but becomes volatile when intertwined with

political competition, socio-economic deprivation, and institutional weakness. Ethno-political conflicts persist largely because identity is instrumentalised within a fragile governance context. Sustainable peace therefore depends not solely on security interventions but on structural transformation that promotes justice, inclusion, and accountable leadership. By reframing religion as a potential resource for peacebuilding rather than division, and by addressing the structural inequities that fuel identity-based mobilization.

**KEYWORDS:** - Nigeria ethno-religious conflict, national security, governance, identity politics, Boko Haram.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria stands at a critical juncture in its post-independence trajectory. Often described as the "Giant of Africa," the country possesses immense human and natural resources, yet it remains profoundly challenged by internal divisions that threaten its cohesion and stability (Tactics Institute, 2025). Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1960, Nigeria's growth has been severely hampered by two intertwining issues: religious fanaticism and ethnic bigotry. These factors have not only undermined national cohesion but have also stifled economic development, political stability, and social harmony (Akande, 2025a).

The question of whether contemporary violence in Nigeria is motivated by religion has become increasingly contested in public discourse. As one analyst observes, "the real question is why the commentariat is loath to admit it" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). This reluctance to confront the religious dimension of Nigeria's crises exists alongside an equally important reality: the country's conflicts cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of religious persecution. Rather, Nigeria faces multiple, distinct yet sometimes overlapping conflicts in nearly every sub-national division (Barnett, 2025).

This article argues that religion and ethnicity in Nigeria function as both lenses through which grievances are perceived and as mobilising tools for collective action, but the root causes of conflict are frequently located in structural factors: governance failures, socio-economic inequalities, competition over land and resources, and the manipulation of identity by political elites (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025; Ugwu et al., 2024). Understanding this complex interplay is essential for developing effective strategies for peace and national integration.

## **Historical Foundations of Ethno-Religious Identity in Nigeria** **Colonial Legacy and the Construction of Divisions**

The foundations of Nigeria's contemporary ethno-religious tensions were laid during the colonial period. The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by British colonial

authorities brought together disparate peoples with different cultures, languages, religions, and political systems into a single administrative entity (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). This fusion was motivated by economic and administrative convenience rather than any organic unity among the constituent groups.

The British colonial policy of "indirect rule" further entrenched existing divisions. In the predominantly Muslim North, the British governed through established emirate structures, preserving and even strengthening the influence of Islamic institutions. In the South, where political structures were more fragmented, colonial administration took different forms, and Christian missionary activity was permitted and even encouraged (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). This differential treatment created regional disparities in education, administration, and economic development that would have lasting consequences.

The three major ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Igbo in the East—each developed distinct cultural and religious identities. The North became predominantly Muslim, the West developed a religious mix of Christianity and Islam alongside traditional practices, and the East became predominantly Christian (Akande, 2025b). These regional-religious concentrations created the template for subsequent political competition, in which religion and ethnicity became proxies for regional interests.

### **Pre-Independence Politics and the Politicisation of Identity**

The politics of decolonisation in the 1950s further crystallised ethno-religious identities as bases for political mobilisation. The major political parties that emerged were organised largely along regional and ethnic lines: the Northern People's Congress (NPC) representing Hausa-Fulani interests in the North, the Action Group (AG) drawing support from the Yoruba West, and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) finding its base among the Igbo East (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025).

The Kano Riots of 1953 stand as an early manifestation of the violent potential of these divisions. When Northern politicians perceived disrespect from Southern counterparts during constitutional negotiations, ethnic and religious tensions erupted in violence that claimed numerous lives (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). This episode foreshadowed the pattern that would characterise much of Nigeria's post-independence conflict: political disputes assuming ethnic and religious colourations, with violence erupting along these pre-existing fault lines.

## **Theoretical Framework: Understanding Ethno-Religious Conflict**

### **Marxist Perspectives on Identity and Conflict**

Marxist analysis illuminates how economic inequalities and class structures underpin ostensibly identity-based conflicts in Nigeria. From this perspective, ethno-religious tensions are not primordial antagonisms but rather manifestations of competition over scarce resources—land, oil revenues, political appointments, and development projects (Ugwu et al., 2024). The Nigerian elite, regardless of ethnic or religious background, have maintained their privileged positions by manipulating identity sentiments to prevent the emergence of class-based solidarity among the masses.

The concentration of oil wealth in the Niger Delta, the control of federal patronage by shifting coalitions of ethnic elites, and the uneven distribution of development infrastructure all create conditions in which communities experience marginalisation in ethnic and religious terms. When a predominantly Christian community in the Middle Belt finds itself excluded from political power dominated by Muslim northerners, or when Muslim communities in the South-West perceive marginalisation by Christian elites, these grievances are experienced through identity lenses even when their ultimate cause is structural inequality (Ugwu et al., 2024).

### **Functionalist Approaches to Social Cohesion**

Functionalist theory, as applied to Nigerian conflicts, examines how social institutions either integrate or fragment societies. From this perspective, religion and ethnicity can serve dual functions: they can provide meaning, belonging, and social support, but they can also become sources of tension when they are the primary basis for political organisation and resource allocation (Ugwu et al., 2024).

The functionalist lens helps explain why religious institutions in northern Nigeria have historically served as both sources of social welfare and as platforms for political mobilisation. When state institutions fail to provide basic services and security, religious and ethnic networks fill the gap, but in doing so they reinforce particularistic identities at the expense of national citizenship. The weakness of state institutions thus perpetuates the salience of sub-national identities (Ugwu et al., 2024).

### **Instrumentalism: Identity as Political Resource**

Instrumentalist approaches argue that political elites actively construct and manipulate ethnic and religious identities to mobilise support and achieve political objectives. In Nigeria's competitive political environment, where access to state resources determines life chances, politicians have powerful incentives to activate identity cleavages during elections (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025).

The 2023 presidential election illustrated this dynamic. The campaign was marked by appeals to religious sentiment, with some candidates framing the contest in explicitly religious terms. Peter Obi, the Labour Party candidate, had previously characterised the prospect of a Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket as "a religious war" (Nwanze, 2025a). The eventual victory of Bola Tinubu, a Muslim from the South-West with a Muslim running mate, raised concerns among Christian communities about their marginalisation—concerns that political opponents were quick to amplify.

### **Contemporary Manifestations of Ethno-Religious Conflict**

#### **Boko Haram and Jihadist Insurgency**

The most devastating manifestation of religiously-inflected violence in Nigeria has been the Boko Haram insurgency. Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, the group emerged from intra-Salafi debates about the compatibility of Western education and secular governance with Islam (Barnett, 2025). Following Yusuf's extrajudicial killing by police in 2009, his successor Abubakar Shekau transformed the movement into a full-scale insurgency that has since claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions.

Boko Haram's ideology represents an extreme form of religious framing. The group's very name—loosely translated as "Western education is forbidden"—signals its fundamental opposition to secular modernity. Shekau developed an expansive concept of takfir (declaring Muslims apostates) that justified violence against any Muslim who did not join the insurgency, including worshippers in mosques (Barnett, 2025). This ultra-takfiri approach led to splits within the jihadist movement, with factions like Ansaru and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) emerging partly in reaction to Shekau's indiscriminate violence.

The group's targeting has included both Muslims and Christians, though Christians have been specifically targeted in attacks on churches, schools, and communities. The 2014 kidnapping of 276 mostly Christian schoolgirls from Chibok brought international notoriety to the group and galvanised global concern about religious persecution in Nigeria (Tactics Institute, 2025). However, the overwhelming majority of Boko Haram's victims have been Muslims, reflecting the group's primary theatre of operations in the Muslim-majority North-East.

By 2025, the jihadist landscape in Nigeria remains highly fragmented but persistently lethal. ISWAP has emerged as the strongest faction, controlling territory in parts of the North-East and continuing to launch attacks on military and civilian targets. Ansaru has reactivated in central and north-western Nigeria, exploiting local grievances to expand its influence (Barnett, 2025). Despite military offensives and international support, the insurgency endures, now entangled with local militias and transnational terror networks across the Sahel (Tactics Institute, 2025).

### **Farmer-Herder Conflicts**

While Boko Haram dominates international headlines, the farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt have proven equally deadly and perhaps more indicative of the complex interplay between religion, ethnicity, and resource competition. These clashes pit predominantly Muslim Fulani herders against predominantly Christian farming communities, but their underlying drivers are rooted in ecological change, population pressure, and competition over land and water resources (Adeoye, 2025; Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

The conflict has intensified since the 2000s, claiming thousands of lives annually. In states like Benue, Plateau, and Kaduna, cycles of retaliation have become entrenched, with attacks on villages, destruction of crops, and killing of livestock creating a persistent state of insecurity (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Between 2020 and 2025 alone, several thousand people were killed in such clashes in the Middle Belt (Tactics Institute, 2025).

Analysts emphasise that while the violence often assumes religious rhetoric, "the issue is no longer a matter of faith, but a matter of land access, economic inequality or even historical marginalization" (Adeoye, 2025). Nevertheless, the religious dimension matters because it shapes perceptions, mobilises support, and complicates conflict resolution. When Christian farmers see their attackers as Muslim Fulani, and Fulani herders perceive themselves as victims of Christian-dominated state security forces, religious identity becomes a lens through which the conflict is understood and perpetuated.

### **Sharia Implementation and Systemic Discrimination**

The return to civilian rule in 1999 was followed by the introduction of Sharia penal codes in twelve northern states, a development that sharply escalated religious tensions. For proponents, Sharia represented the expression of cultural and religious values; for critics, it constituted systemic discrimination against Christians and non-Muslims (Nwanze, 2025a).

In states like Kaduna and Kano, the implementation of Sharia has been accompanied by restrictions on church construction, limitations on Christian access to civil service positions, and the application of separate legal standards (Tactics Institute, 2025). Archbishop Matthew Man-Oso Ndagoso of Kaduna noted in 2025 that Islamic organisations continue to receive preferential treatment in education and funding from state institutions (Tactics Institute, 2025).

These legal dualities create structural resentment and undermine national cohesion. The federal government's constitutional secularism conflicts with regional religious enforcement, creating a dual system that perpetuates mistrust and provides fertile ground for extremist narratives (Nwanze, 2025a). Blasphemy violence, whereby mobs slaughter individuals accused of

desecrating Islam, remains a recurrent feature across northern Nigeria, with perpetrators rarely facing prosecution (Tactics Institute, 2025).

### **Separatist Movements and Ethnic Nationalism**

In the South-East, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) continues to mobilise support for secession, drawing on memories of the 1967-1970 civil war that killed over a million people, mostly Igbo civilians (Nwanze, 2025b). The movement's grievances centre on perceived marginalisation of Igbo people in Nigerian political and economic structures. While primarily ethnic in character, the conflict has taken on religious dimensions as well, with IPOB's predominantly Christian constituency viewing the Nigerian state through the lens of Muslim northern domination.

The Nigerian government's response to IPOB has been heavily militarised, with military operations in the South-East leading to further alienation. The 2025 life imprisonment sentence of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu following a controversial legal process has the potential to further inflame tensions in the region (Nwanze, 2025b).

In the Niger Delta, militant groups have long protested the environmental degradation and economic marginalisation caused by oil extraction. While these movements are primarily focused on resource control and environmental justice, they too draw on ethnic identities and, in some cases, religious rhetoric (Ugwu et al., 2024).

### **The Political Economy of Ethno-Religious Conflict Resource Competition and Identity Mobilisation**

The persistence of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria cannot be understood without reference to the country's political economy. Nigeria's oil-dependent economy has created a classic "resource curse" dynamic, in which control of the state determines access to wealth. With oil revenues accounting for the majority of government income and foreign exchange earnings, political power is the primary route to economic advancement (Ugwu et al., 2024).

This structure creates intense competition for political office, and in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, mobilising identity groups becomes the most effective electoral strategy. Politicians cultivate ethnic and religious constituencies, dispensing patronage along identity lines and framing political competition as a zero-sum struggle between communities (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). This dynamic was evident in the 2023 elections and continues to shape political alignments ahead of 2027 (Nwanze, 2025a).

### **Economic Dimensions of Farmer-Herder Conflict**

The farmer-herder conflict illustrates the economic underpinnings of identity-based violence. Climate change has reduced grazing land in the Sahel, pushing Fulani herders southward into the Middle Belt. Simultaneously, population growth has increased pressure on agricultural land, and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms has left communities to fend for themselves (Adeoye, 2025).

When herders' cattle destroy farmers' crops, and farmers retaliate by rustling cattle or poisoning wells, a cycle of violence ensues that rapidly takes on ethnic and religious colouration. The Nigerian state's response—often militarised and perceived as biased—further entrenches communal identities and grievances (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

### **Unemployment and the Pool of Potential Recruits**

High unemployment, particularly among young men, creates a pool of potential recruits for armed groups. Boko Haram, bandit gangs, and ethnic militias all draw on young people with limited economic prospects. For these recruits, joining an armed group may offer not only ideological purpose but also material benefits and a sense of belonging (Tactics Institute, 2025).

The failure of Nigeria's economy to generate sufficient employment, despite decades of oil wealth, thus directly contributes to conflict dynamics. When young people see no future in peaceful livelihoods, the appeals of extremist groups—whether jihadist, ethnic nationalist, or criminal—become more compelling (Ugwu et al., 2024).

### **Regional Variations in Identity Formation**

#### **Northern Nigeria: Religious Cohesion Amid Ethnic Diversity**

In the predominantly Muslim North, religion serves as a powerful unifying force that transcends ethnic divisions. The legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate, established in the early 19th century, entrenched Islam as both a religious and governing ideology across much of the region (Barnett, 2025). This historical inheritance means that northern Muslims, whether Hausa, Fulani, or from minority groups, share a common religious identity that often takes precedence over ethnic affiliations.

This religious cohesion has political implications. Northern politicians can mobilise support across ethnic lines by appealing to shared Islamic identity and concerns. The implementation of Sharia in twelve northern states reflected this pan-Islamic solidarity (Nwanze, 2025a). However, it has also created tensions with non-Muslim minorities in the North and with the Christian-majority South, who perceive northern religious solidarity as a threat to their interests.

### **Southern Nigeria: Ethnic Primacy Over Religious Unity**

In contrast to the North, Southern Nigeria presents a picture of ethnic fragmentation even within the predominantly Christian population. The major groups—Yoruba, Igbo, and numerous smaller ethnic communities—often prioritise ethnic heritage over a shared Christian identity (Nwanze, 2025a). This divergence raises fundamental questions about the nature of identity in Nigeria: why does religious cohesion characterise the North while ethnic particularism prevails in the South?

Historical factors provide part of the explanation. The Sokoto Caliphate's centralised Islamic structure contrasted with the more fragmented political systems of the South. Colonial policies that reinforced northern Islamic institutions while allowing greater Christian missionary activity in the South created different trajectories of religious institutionalisation (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). Additionally, the civil war and its aftermath entrenched Igbo ethnic consciousness, while Yoruba sub-ethnic identities remain politically salient.

The consequence is that Christian leaders in the South may hesitate to speak out against violence targeting Christians in other parts of the country because their primary loyalty lies with their ethnic group rather than their co-religionists (Nwanze, 2025a). An Igbo priest, for example, might feel less urgency to advocate for Berom victims in Plateau State than for Igbo communities facing threats elsewhere.

### **The Middle Belt: Convergence of Fault Lines**

The Middle Belt region serves as a microcosm of Nigeria's identity crisis. Here, indigenous ethnic groups—many adhering to Christianity or traditional religions—find themselves in conflict with predominantly Muslim Fulani herders over land, resources, and political representation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). The region is where the religious cohesion of the North meets the ethnic diversity of the South, and where resource competition assumes identity dimensions.

The violence in Plateau, Benue, and Kaduna states has been particularly devastating. While the rhetoric surrounding these clashes often adopts religious tones, the underlying tensions frequently stem from long-standing ethnic grievances and competition for political control at the local level (Adeoye, 2025). The complexity of these conflicts—simultaneously ethnic, religious, and economic—defies simple explanation and demands nuanced policy responses.

## **Consequences for National Security and Development**

### **Human Cost and Displacement**

The human toll of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria has been staggering. Between 2020 and 2025, independent conflict monitors recorded tens of thousands of deaths from communal violence, insurgency, and banditry (Tactics Institute, 2025). While precise figures vary, the pattern is consistent: all communities are suffering, though the forms and locations of violence differ. Christians appear to form a disproportionate share of civilian deaths in some datasets, while Muslims have borne heavier losses in areas affected by insurgency and banditry (Tactics Institute, 2025).

Beyond fatalities, conflict has displaced millions. The Boko Haram insurgency alone has created over two million internally displaced persons, primarily in the North-East. Farmer-herder conflicts have displaced hundreds of thousands more from their homes and livelihoods. This displacement creates secondary problems—strains on host communities, loss of agricultural production, and the radicalisation of displaced youth in camps (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

### **Economic Disruption**

The economic consequences of persistent conflict are profound. Violence discourages both domestic and foreign investment, as investors seek stable environments for their capital (Akande, 2025b). Nigeria's image as a volatile state has led to capital flight and an over-reliance on oil revenues, which are themselves vulnerable to global price fluctuations.

Local economies in conflict zones are devastated. Markets close, trade routes become impassable, and businesses fail. Farming communities cannot plant or harvest, creating food insecurity that extends beyond conflict zones. The diversion of government resources from development to security expenditures further constrains economic growth (Akande, 2025b).

### **Weakened State Legitimacy**

Perhaps most damagingly, the state's inability to protect citizens and resolve conflicts undermines its legitimacy. When communities cannot rely on the state for security, they turn to ethnic militias, vigilante groups, or, in some cases, extremist organisations that offer protection and rudimentary governance (Ugwu et al., 2024).

This dynamic creates a vicious cycle: state weakness encourages non-state armed groups, which further weakens the state, which then becomes even less capable of providing security and services. In parts of the North-East, North-West, and Middle Belt, the Nigerian state's presence is

minimal, with armed groups exercising effective control over territory and populations (Tactics Institute, 2025).

The international community has taken notice. The United States designated Nigeria a "Country of Particular Concern" in 2025 over alleged religious persecution, a designation that carries diplomatic and economic implications (Tactics Institute, 2025). While the Nigerian government disputes the characterisation, the designation reflects genuine international concern about religious freedom and state capacity.

### **State Responses and Their Limitations**

#### **Military and Security Approaches**

The Nigerian state's primary response to conflict has been military and police action. The armed forces have conducted numerous operations against Boko Haram, bandit gangs, and separatist groups, sometimes with tactical success but rarely with lasting effect (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). The military approach suffers from several limitations: insufficient manpower and equipment for Nigeria's vast territory, corruption and human rights abuses that alienate local populations, and a reactive posture that struggles to address root causes.

In the North-East, a multinational force with neighbouring countries has contained but not defeated Boko Haram/ISWAP. In the North-West, military operations against bandits have disrupted some criminal networks but failed to address the underlying grievances that sustain them. In the South-East, militarised responses to IPOB have deepened alienation without resolving separatist sentiments (Nwanze, 2025b).

#### **Policy Initiatives and Their Mixed Results**

Successive Nigerian governments have launched policy initiatives aimed at addressing ethno-religious tensions. The Niger Delta Amnesty Programme, which provided stipends and rehabilitation to former militants, achieved some success in reducing violence in the oil-producing region, though its long-term sustainability remains uncertain (Ugwu et al., 2024).

Several states in the Middle Belt have enacted anti-open grazing laws aimed at regulating herder movements and reducing farmer-herder conflict. While these laws respond to genuine farmer grievances, they have been controversial among herder communities and have sometimes escalated rather than reduced tensions (Adeoye, 2025).

The federal government has also established various commissions and dialogue mechanisms, but these have often been under-resourced, lacking in political will, or overwhelmed by the scale of the challenges they face. The National Peace Committee, composed of respected elders and

religious leaders, has played a mediating role in some electoral crises, but its influence is limited (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025).

### **Political Constraints on Effective Response**

Effective response to ethno-religious conflict is constrained by political calculations. President Bola Tinubu, facing re-election in 2027, must preserve the political coalition that brought him to power, which includes northern Muslim elites (Nwanze, 2025a). This limits his ability to confront issues such as Sharia implementation, blasphemy violence, or discrimination against Christians in northern states that might antagonise his political base.

Similarly, opposition politicians like Peter Obi have maintained studied silence on religious persecution, recognising that the northern vote remains crucial for any successful presidential bid (Nwanze, 2025a). The structure of Nigerian politics—in which candidates must build cross-regional, cross-religious coalitions thus constrains political leaders from addressing identity-based grievances forthrightly.

### **Pathways to Sustainable Peace**

#### **Institutional Reform and Governance**

Addressing ethno-religious conflict requires strengthening the institutions that manage diversity and resolve disputes. Scholars recommend establishing a National Reconciliation Commission to address historical grievances, promote truth-telling, and recommend structural reforms (Adeoye, 2025). Such a commission could draw on experiences from South Africa, Rwanda, and other post-conflict societies to facilitate healing and institutional change.

Decentralising governance to bring decision-making closer to communities could also reduce identity-based competition for centralised resources. Greater fiscal federalism, with states and localities controlling more of their revenues, would reduce the stakes of capturing the centre (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). However, such reforms face political opposition from those who benefit from centralised control.

#### **Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Leadership**

Religious leaders have crucial roles to play in conflict prevention and resolution. Genuine and sustained interfaith dialogue must move beyond theological discussions to address shared socio-economic grievances and instances of state neglect that fuel tensions (Adeoye, 2025). When Muslim and Christian leaders jointly advocate for justice, development, and security, they model the coexistence that national unity requires.

The Sultan of Sokoto, as the spiritual leader of Nigeria's Muslims, and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have occasionally issued joint statements and convened peace meetings. These efforts should be strengthened and institutionalised, with regular forums for religious leaders to address emerging tensions before they escalate (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

### **Justice and Accountability**

The establishment of a robust system of justice and accountability is paramount. The government must demonstrate unwavering commitment to prosecuting perpetrators of violence, whether they belong to Fulani militias, Boko Haram, ethnic-based militant groups, or state security forces, without any hint of bias (Adeoye, 2025).

A national prosecution tracker for cases of communal and political violence, updated monthly, would send a powerful signal that violence cannot be used to negotiate political or economic advantage. A modest national compensation fund for victims' families would also demonstrate moral responsibility and provide some measure of justice (Adeoye, 2025).

### **Economic Diversification and Inclusion**

Massive economic diversification to reduce reliance on oil can create jobs and reduce tension among groups competing for oil revenue. Expanding sectors like agriculture, technology, and tourism can foster collaboration and provide common ground for economic growth (Akande, 2025b). When citizens across identity groups share in economic opportunity, the appeal of zero-sum identity politics diminishes.

Inclusive policies to ensure equitable representation and resource allocation across different ethnic and religious groups are vital. Creating a sense of belonging for all Nigerians can mitigate feelings of alienation and marginalisation (Ugwu et al., 2024). This includes ensuring that political appointments, development projects, and security deployments reflect the country's diversity.

### **Civic Education and National Identity**

Strengthening civic education to promote national identity over ethnic and religious identities is essential for long-term transformation. Nigerians must be educated about their shared history, common challenges, and interdependent future (Akande, 2025a). The aspirational motto, "Unity in Diversity," must be given substantive content through curricula, media, and public discourse that emphasise what unites Nigerians rather than what divides them.

Initiatives that encourage collaboration between different ethnic and religious communities—joint economic ventures, cultural exchanges, and peacebuilding programmes—can foster mutual

understanding and cooperation (Adeoye, 2025). When communities work together on shared challenges, identity differences become less salient.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study recommends comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at strengthening democratic accountability, rule of law, and equitable resource distribution.

Need for inclusive governance structures that ensure fair political representation across religious and ethnic divides. Economic empowerment initiatives targeting youth unemployment and regional inequalities are essential to reducing vulnerability to mobilisation along identity lines.

### **CONCLUSION**

Nigeria stands at a crossroads, burdened by the weight of historical grievances rooted in colonial-era divisions and sustained by post-independence governance failures. The country's ethno-religious conflicts are not primordial antagonisms but rather the products of political, economic, and social structures that have incentivised identity-based mobilisation and rewarded zero-sum competition for state resources (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025; Ugwu et al., 2024).

The path forward requires acknowledging complexity while acting decisively. Nigeria's conflicts cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of religious persecution, but neither can the religious dimensions of violence be dismissed. Jihadist groups are indeed waging ideologically-rooted campaigns, and Christians in some regions face systematic discrimination and violence (Tactics Institute, 2025). At the same time, Muslims have borne the heaviest burden of insurgency-related deaths, and many conflicts are driven more by land, resources, and political marginalisation than by faith (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach: institutional reforms that strengthen the state's capacity to provide justice and security; economic diversification that creates opportunities across identity lines; interfaith dialogue that builds trust and models coexistence; and civic education that cultivates a shared national identity (Adeoye, 2025; Akande, 2025a).

The potential for growth and development remains vast if Nigeria can take bold steps in addressing these challenges directly. By promoting unity, inclusivity, and economic diversification, Nigeria can begin to heal its divisions, laying the groundwork for a more harmonious and prosperous future. Only through collective effort and commitment to national identity can Nigeria reclaim its status as the true Giant of Africa (Akande, 2025b).

The fundamental question remains: can Nigeria truly exist as one unified nation? If the North continues to define itself primarily through a religious lens, and the South through the prism of ethnicity, the concept of a cohesive Nigerian identity hangs precariously in the balance (Nwanze, 2025a). Until these fundamental questions are confronted and addressed with genuine commitment, the cycle of violence will remain a potent symptom of a deeper national malaise.

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